

Self-Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird ***By Frida Kahlo***

Frida Kahlo painted *Self-Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird* in 1940. In spite of its small size (approximately 16" x 24"), there are many different interesting aspects to focus on, many of which are symbolic to Kahlo. Kahlo faces the viewer with her head and shoulders taking up much of the space. She is surrounded by green leaves of similar size and shape with one yellow leaf behind her head. On the left side of the painting a spider monkey holds a piece of the thorns that encircle her neck. There are several drops of blood on her neck from the piercing thorns. A black cat looks over her other shoulder. A black hummingbird hangs from the thorns with its beak in the hollow of her throat. Her hair is piled with a purple textile into a figure eight-like design with two butterfly-like creatures with lace wings visible on either side. Two creatures fly above her head with a flower body and dragonfly wings. Kahlo's expression is solemn and appears to be patiently enduring pain. Her focus is inward and not engaging with the viewer.

A rounded arched shape is repeated throughout the composition. It is seen in the wings of the hummingbird, the shapes on the leaves, the mustache, the eyebrows, the hair braid, and in the wings of the insects. The portrait uses symmetrical balance with Kahlo placed in the center of the composition, the bird position, the eyebrows, the mustache, and the hair part all dividing the figure into two symmetrical halves. The environment is less symmetrical with two different creatures behind her shoulders and the more random placement of leaves and the contrast of the yellow leaf behind her head. The background uses mostly cool colors. The color on the figure is mostly warm with very pink cheeks and red lips. Her neck appears uncomfortably long. The repeated arched shape unifies the work by connecting the figure to the environment. The placement of the hummingbird is unusual and draws attention to Kahlo's facial expression.

The unusual creatures and placement of the figure in the environment suggest that Kahlo is not painting a purely realistic scene, but is arranging symbolic elements to communicate a feeling or idea. A bird often symbolizes freedom and a hummingbird is often thought to be colorful and hovering above a flower, yet this bird is black, lifeless, and tied to her necklace of thorns. Frida Kahlo spent much of her life in physical pain after a streetcar accident at age fifteen which resulted in thirty five operations to try to repair her body. In her recovery she was often confined to her bed. She could not have children, but she did have several pet monkeys that were her beloved companions. Kahlo painted many self-portraits often with animals surrounding her. Kahlo often refers in her art to her Mexican heritage and her relationship with her husband a famous Mexican muralist, Diego Rivera. The light values and the placement of the insects suggest flight and freedom in contrast to the darkness of the bird, cat and monkey which appear to be grounding the figure. The monkey may represent one of her pet monkeys or maybe a child. A monkey is found in many of Frida Kahlo's self-portraits often on her shoulder. The monkey holds the end of the thorns. Is he freeing her or is he pulling on the end? Perhaps the cat and monkey represent two sides of her personality. The contrast of Kahlo's expression with her unusual surroundings makes the viewer wonder what pain she has endured.

The work has elements of realism in the details in Kahlo's face, the monkey and the cat, yet some elements create a conflict in accepting the scene as real such as the strange butterflies and flying flowers. Kahlo arranged the work very carefully with the use of symmetry and the repetition of shape. Her use of color contrasting warm and cool color schemes separates the figure from the environment. The work is expressive through its use of symbols and their arrangement in the composition. The result is a mysterious work inviting the viewer to untangle the relationship of the different symbols to reveal Kahlo's pain and her communication of her feelings through her artwork.